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AUTHOR	Smith, Jim H.
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ABSTRACT

Churches and religious organizations in Connecticut and across the United States, especially those in urban neighborhoods, often work to help ensure that public school students have the best opportunity to obtain a meaningful education, providing grassroots services that support public schools. This paper presents examples of several successful partnerships between faith communities and public schools around the state of Connecticut and throughout the United States. It concludes by examining the U.S. Department of Education's 1995 guidelines for partnerships between religious organizations and public schools and discussing guidelines for faith leaders found within the Partnership for Family Involvement in Education's report, "Faith Communities Joining with Local Communities To Support Children's Learning." Sidebars include information on how faith communities can approach their local schools to offer help, what churches and organizations can do to help, and whom to call to get more information on playing a meaningful role in support of local public schools in Connecticut. (SM)

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Faith Communities and Public Schools: A Collaboration to Improve Education

By: Jim H. Smith*

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Overview

Churches and religious organizations in Connecticut enhance the quality of life in their communities in many different ways. One of their most important civic investments is support for the work of public schools. In Connecticut and across the United States, churches and religious organizations serving communities of all sizes, and especially urban neighborhoods, help to ensure that public school students have the best opportunity to obtain a meaningful education.

Introduction

"Education is the number one or number two issue in the country, in part arising from serious workforce and income challenges," Philadelphia Superintendent of Schools David W. Hornbeck told the National Council of Churches in Chicago in November, 1998. "Thirty-eight years ago there were about 17 people paying social security for every person receiving it; today, there are about three paying for every person receiving it, and the income of the payers is going down. Since the early 1970s, inflation-adjusted income for all but the upper end of the economic scale has declined. For young families, median income has plunged 33 percent. For young black families, the drop was 46 percent; for young hispanic families, 28 percent; and young whites, 22 percent. In contrast, the incomes of families in the top five percent of society were 55 percent higher in 1996 than in similar families two decades ago.

"Given this growing gap, this experiment we call democracy is at risk. And furthermore, I would argue, the soul of the nation is at risk. In the next 30 minutes, during the time I speak to you, 200 children will drop out of school; 56 children will be born into poverty; 30 will be born at low birth-weight; six will be arrested for a violent crime; and one will be wounded by gunfire."

In the course of the speech that followed, Dr. Hornbeck called upon the National Council of Churches to use their "moral vision and political power" to support the rights of all public school children to a quality education. The Council, in turn, adopted a policy, "The Churches and the Public Schools at the Close of the Twentieth Century." It was built on the understanding that, "The public schools are the primary route for most children – especially the children of poverty – into full participation in our economic, political, and community life. As a consequence, all of us, Christians and non-Christians alike, have a moral responsibility to support, strengthen and reform the public schools. They have been and continue to be both an avenue of opportunity and a major cohesive force in our society – a society becoming more diverse racially, culturally and religiously."

Urging local churches to support their public schools, the Council's policy went on to spell out a wide range of ways in which churches "can and should emphasize the importance of education and public schools," including:

- honoring teachers as role models for young people;
- emphasizing books and literacy, speaking out for the academic freedom of teachers and librarians, calling for the broad

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*Jim H. Smith is a freelance writer and marketing communications professional who lives in Newington. An educator who has taught at several Connecticut universities, he has published both non-fiction and fiction in many periodicals. In 1997, he authored the book, *Greater Hartford: Celebrating Cultural Diversity.*

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availability of all age-appropriate materials and books in public school libraries;
- initiating programs in cooperation with the public schools to provide after-school and vacation help, enrichment, adopt-a-school programs, and emphasis on literacy and reading;
- insisting that the science curriculum present the best textbooks and teaching at all levels;
- providing parenting classes to emphasize the special responsibilities of families to schools and school-aged children;
- encouraging the use of curricula in all schools that reflect the role of the many racial and ethnic groups in the history and culture of the United States;
- advocating for quality, age-appropriate Comprehensive Health Education in public schools;
- advocating for the inclusion of differently-abled students in classrooms, and ensuring that teachers have the special training needed to meet those children's needs; and
- supporting thoughtful reform and innovation in local schools to improve teaching and learning at all levels.

Across the country, indeed, in virtually every community, churches and religious organizations provide grassroots services that support public schools...

Traditions of Support

In taking such a definitive stand in support of public education, the National Council of Churches was not unique. Other faith communities have adopted similar programs. In May, 2000, for instance, delegates to the United Methodist Church's top legislative meeting in Cleveland adopted a resolution supporting public education. Affirming that "the church has a moral responsibility to strengthen, support, and reform public schools, which are the entry point of most children into economic, political and community life," the delegates called on local churches, annual conferences and church-wide agencies to support public education through a multi-point action plan that included:

- establishing partnerships with local public schools, such as after-school programs or literacy and reading programs;
- monitoring reform efforts in public schools, including the creation of charter and magnet schools and classes sized to meet the needs of all children; and
- encouraging school libraries to provide quality materials to expand students' understanding of human life throughout the world.

Across the country, indeed, in virtually every community, faith-based organizations provide grassroots services that support public schools through actions like those endorsed by the United Methodists, as well as many other kinds of activities that could be replicated by faith communities almost anywhere. The following are just a few examples:

- **The Chicago Public Schools Interfaith Community Partnership**
  The Chicago Public Schools Interfaith Community Partnership, a multicultural interfaith group of religious leaders, was developed to tackle such challenges as student discipline problems, truancy and low attendance, school safety, student and staff attitudes, and self-esteem issues. The group provides crisis intervention services, parent workshops, counsel on curricula emphasizing character and values, expansion of local school partnerships, and other services.
- **The Alexandria Tutoring Consortium**
  The Alexandria (Virginia) Tutoring Consortium is a partnership between the Alexandria Faith Community and the public schools through which a congregation-based coordinator recruits and schedules tutors who are then trained by the schools before helping hundreds of area youngsters learn to read.
- **Urban Fellowship Mentoring, Tutoring and Enrichment Program**
  The Urban Fellowship Mentoring, Tutoring and Enrichment Program was developed by the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance following racial unrest in St. Petersburg, Florida's Jordon Park neighborhood several years ago. Its objective: find ways to make after-school hours safe and productive for children. The group developed an ambitious slate of activities and quickly found partners, including the National Conference on Community and Justice and the University of South Florida, to make it work.

Coast to coast, such initiatives abound in small towns and large cities alike, reflecting the creative impulse of faith community leaders to improve the way in which the next generation learns. That impulse should come as no surprise, says Nancy Ammerman, Ph.D., a professor of the sociology of religion at the **Hartford Seminary**, in Hartford, since education is a leading concern of many church members in all denominations.

"Public education," says Ammerman, "is something individual church members are often concerned about, but it is usually not the highest priority for congregations. What frequently pushes congregations to take action in communities is the perception of critical need, so programs addressing food, shelter and clothing requirements take priority. When you get beyond those needs, however, and congregations think about how they can make a long-term investment in community betterment, then public schools quickly rise on the list."

When that happens, says Ammerman, the most common way in which churches support public schools is through tutoring programs. "Schools may come to the churches looking for volunteers to help with this important service. The churches may send volunteers to the schools. Or they may make space in the church buildings for tutoring and after-school programs." Two major studies, conducted by the Seminary, offer some insight into the community-oriented spirit of voluntarism that illuminates many churches, and the range of services churches provide in support of public education.

The Seminary's **Hartford Institute for Religion Research** provides research-based information on the social scientific study of religion that can be used by religious leaders, as well as the general public. In 1997, the Institute launched a project called "Organizing Religious Work" to document and better understand what people of faith are doing in their communities and which organizations enable them to accomplish their goals. The project involved interviews with representatives of 549 congregations across the United States. Additionally, information was gathered about nearly 6,000 connections between congregations and other organizations in communities.

The introduction to the report on that study said, in part, "The well-being of every community depends on harnessing the contributions of its citizens. Sustaining viable communities requires places where people can gather, work together, and learn to trust one another..."

The study's five conclusions are instructive to anyone who wants to understand how congregations impact the communities they serve. The Institute found that:

1) More than 30,000 congregations provide a point of gathering, worship and community engagement for the roughly half of Americans who participate in them on a regular basis.
2) Congregations are highly connected to the rest of their communities' voluntary and social service sectors, reporting, on average, more than six connections to groups that provide for the well-being of the community in a variety of ways.
3) Nationwide, the second most common activity congregations participate in (after addressing serious immediate human needs, such as food, shelter and health concerns) is support for various educational, cultural and health-related activities. Among the specific services in support of public education were tutoring, after-school care and literacy classes.
4) Well over half of all congregations have at least one outside organization that benefits from space available in the church buildings.
5) Congregations also contribute people power. On average, congregations send volunteers to three organizations. And 74 percent of congregations report that they send volunteers to help at least one group.

In March, 2001, the Institute published a report called "Faith Communities Today," the findings of the largest survey of congregations ever conducted in the United States. Among that study's findings was the fact that while more than 80 percent of congregations help needy people with financial assistance and food assistance, almost 40 percent of congregations provide tutoring assistance for students, and an even larger number offer daycare and pre- and after-school programs.

"Because family participation in children's learning is often influenced by work schedules and time constraints, it is crucial that businesses, community and

Approaching Your Local Schools

"The more targeted and clear you are, when you go to the schools, the more likely you are to be successful," says Paul Christie, executive director of Center City Churches, in Hartford. "Have a viable suggestion, based on research to determine your community's needs."

Christie also made other suggestions as follows:

Make sure you really want to be a help.
Schools and students in almost every community can use the energy and efforts of well-meaning volunteers. But it's important that the objective be helping to meet the genuine needs of the students and schools.

Know what the needs are.
Work with your community's schools and parents to find out what they need. Then think about how your organization can help to address those needs.

Go in without your own agenda.
Churches and religious organizations are no different than any other group when it comes to helping public schools. The objective should be to help the schools and the students, not to advance the philosophy of the church or religious organization.

In Connecticut, both individual churches and religious organizations have been creating their own programs to help public schools and children – with a remarkable array of services – for several years.

religious organizations, and especially families and schools support parent and employee involvement in education," notes the Partnership for Family Involvement in Education, in an on-line report, *Faith Communities Joining with Local Communities to Support Children's Learning* (http://www.ed.gov/pubs/goodideas/example.html). The report is packed with creative ideas about how to help schools and children, how to build coalitions, and the appropriate role of faith communities as they work with public schools. In Connecticut, both individual churches and religious organizations have been creating their own programs to help public schools and children – with a remarkable array of services – for several years.

Fostering Better Public Education in Connecticut

Central Baptist Church

Hartford's Central Baptist Church presents a good example of the various ways in which churches participate, both individually and collectively, in their community. Founded in 1790, Central Baptist Church is "very into the city," says Richard Mattheson, administrative coordinator and minister of music. Central Baptist's congregation is devoted to the city that has been its home for more than 200 years.

At the same time, the church is grappling with 21st century realities, such as economics that could not have been anticipated when the current church building was constructed in 1924. The parishioners, says Mattheson, have been compelled to think of innovative ways to cover their expenses. Finding a solution, they have also found a way to provide a service for the community.

"Central Baptist is a large building with several floors," says Mattheson. "On the upper floors, we've been able to lease space at a modest rate to organizations that benefit the community. We help to ensure the success of those organizations while also generating a predictable income stream for the church." Leasing organizations include a daycare program serving 100 children every workday, and the organization YO! Hartford (Youth Opportunities), which works to develop meaningful employment and learning opportunities for Hartford youngsters.

At the same time, Central Baptist supports the community through more traditional philanthropic activities, collecting both money and goods to help the needy. "We often make food collections," says Mattheson, "and every summer, the church takes up a collection of money and merchandise to provide back-to-school supplies, such as backpacks, for disadvantaged kids."

In this process, Central Baptist has learned, as have many other churches, that there can be power in numbers. The church is, for instance, affiliated with Covenant to Care, Inc., a statewide organization that aims to improve the lives of abused and neglected children in Connecticut by acquiring and distributing community resources, offering mentoring services, and recruiting foster and adoptive families. Signing covenants with more than 200 faith communities, Covenant to Care provides donated goods and services to some 30,000 Connecticut children every year.

Center City Churches

Central Baptist is also a member of Center City Churches, a Hartford organization with 12 participating congregations. Center City Churches serves the community with many different kinds of service programs, including a soup kitchen called MANNA Community Meals; Peter's Retreat, a supportive housing program for adults living with AIDS; MANNA Assistance and Advocacy, a food pantry, fuel and emergency assistance program; and several innovative programs targeting public school students from impoverished neighborhoods.

Founded more than 30 years ago, Center City Churches started as a senior center. Then, in the early 1970s, it opened a gymnasium for youngsters in Central Baptist Church. "We wanted to have a long-term impact on the lives of kids," says Paul Christie, executive director of the organization. So, ten years ago, the organization changed its gymnasium activity into a program called the Center for Youth, an after-school tutoring and cultural enrichment program for children who attend Hartford's Betances and Maria Sanchez Schools, two schools serving impoverished neighborhoods.

Today, 150 students at each school benefit from the after school activities. An even larger number take part in a summer "camp" that offers them a mix of recreational, academic and cultural enrichment activities.

To maximize the impact of the program at the schools, Center City Churches also supports The Family Resource Center at Betances School in collaboration with the Connecticut State Department of Education. The Family Resource Center provides family support, educational programs and referrals to parents with children in the schools who need special help.

Each summer, Center City Churches sponsors a youth employment project which is partly funded by the Summer Youth Employment Program of the Department of Labor. Nearly 40 high school students who participate receive academic job preparation training every morning and then work, mostly at Hartford hospitals, where they rotate through several different areas, gaining experience in the process.

And last year, Center City Churches launched a new program called Family School Connection. Supported through a partnership with the Junior League and the Children's Trust Fund, the new program targets truancy. Program volunteers visit the homes of students who are chronically absent, working with families to ensure the kids go to school and helping them to see the schools as a valuable resource.

"The mission of Center City Churches is to work in partnership with others to strengthen community in Hartford by responding to people in need, through programs that change lives and renew human possibility," says Christie. "By working together, our member churches have greater collective power. The collective resources have enabled us to receive grants, for instance, expanding our influence."

Capitol Region Conference of Churches

Greater influence is one of the things churches seek in joining the Capitol Region Conference of Churches, says the Rev. Shelley Copeland, that organization's executive director. Focusing on Hartford and the 29 towns that make up the Greater Hartford region, the Conference has a membership of more than 300 churches, 150 of which provide the bulk of its financial support.

The Conference's work targets 36 Hartford schools serving populations of needy children and begins, every autumn, with a program called Prayer on the Playground, which was started, six years ago, by former Sand School Principal Susie Horton, also an ordained minister. Each year, on the Friday before the first day of school, ministers and community leaders gather on the playgrounds of each of the schools to pray for the success of the schools in the coming year.

The Conference then supports the schools with an investment of supplies and resources. "We ask the principals, specifically, what the schools need," says Copeland. "We buy computers. We pay for field trips. Some of the poorest schools don't even have pencils. Whatever the schools need most, we try to provide those resources for them."

Asylum Hill Congregational Church

Even though organizations like Copeland's and Christie's find power in collaboration, individual churches are just as likely to support schools on their own, as Hartford's Asylum Hill Congregational Church demonstrates. In the late 1950s, says Phyllis Reeds, director of outreach and membership involvement, the church actually considered moving out of Hartford, but ultimately decided to stay and also determined, at that point, that it has a mission to help Hartford neighborhoods. Supporting public schools evolved as a primary way to fulfill that mission.

In the 1970's, the church's congregation began providing after-school tutoring services for students at the local M. D. Fox and West Middle Schools. That modest beginning evolved, in 1978, into ConnectiKids, which, along with Aetna, Inc., was honored in 2000 with a Daily Point of Light Award from the Points of Light Foundation, the Knights of Columbus and the Corporation for National Service.

Working in partnership with local schools and parents, ConnectiKids recruits businesses, state agencies, churches, nonprofit organizations, and – most especially – volunteers who become tutors to sixth graders throughout the city. The mission of the program is to work with schools, families and the community to steer kids in the right direction, helping them develop both self-esteem and a positive attitude toward education. Students are bussed to corporations such as Aetna, MassMutual, The Hartford, and the Connecticut Department of Transportation every afternoon, where they meet with their tutors who work with them using the school curriculum.

What Can Your Church or Organization Do?

The ways in which the faith community can support public schools and the students who attend them are really limited only by the imagination of those involved. Schools can almost always use help. No matter what kinds of budgets have been allocated, there are never enough resources.

Some of the services churches and religious organizations provide to support public schools and students include the following:

- Donate funds;
- Donate goods and services;
- Provide tutor and mentor services;
- Offer before- and after-school programs for students;
- Support early childhood development and preschool programs;
- Provide programs, such as childcare or daycare services, that make it possible for parents with multiple responsibilities to actively participate in the schools;
- Help children learn about careers and the importance of education;
- Provide space for youth-oriented programs or PTO/PTA groups;
- Help to build community coalitions and collaborations to benefit the schools; and
- Participate in groups of churches that support public education.

"...Better education is everybody's business."

- The Partnership for Family Involvement in Education

While ConnectiKids has, clearly, emerged as a successful model for the kind of collaboration to which churches and religious organizations can inspire, Asylum Hill Congregational Church has also continued to do things on its own, within its neighborhood, says Reeds. Throughout the years since the church decided to remain in Hartford, members of the church have served on boards of education, learning about the schools' needs firsthand. Fifteen years ago, the church "adopted" a sixth grade class at the middle school and raised some $500,000 to help with scholarships for those students. "Many of them," Reeds reports, "went on to higher education."

The church also started girls' and boys' clubs at the middle school and remains actively involved with the school's parent/ teacher organization. During meetings of that organization, church volunteers provide child care to encourage greater parent participation.

Trinity Episcopal Church

The nearby Trinity Episcopal Church, also on Hartford's Asylum Hill, has a longstanding commitment to ConnectiKids as well, providing volunteer tutors through the year. But, like Asylum Hill Congregational Church, Trinity Episcopal supports many other projects designed to help students, as well.

One such program is the Trinity Asylum Hill Arts Project (TAAP), a multi-disciplinary program launched in 1995, says Trudy White, church school and volunteer coordinator at the church. Youngsters meet after school on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays to work on a wide range of arts projects. The program includes dinner every Thursday evening. Twice each year, TAAP holds a production at which the students get to showcase the arts projects they've been working on.

Similarly, the church sponsors a chorister program for youngsters 7 to12, which is operated through the Royal School of Church Music, an education organization founded in 1927 to raise musical standards and promote the use of music in Christian worship. In addition, the church provides space for youth programs, such as Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts that generally meet every week.

Episcopal Church of St. James & St. Paul

In the fall of 2001, Trinity Episcopal became the first satellite of Light and Peace, an innovative program developed by the Episcopal Church of St. James & St. Paul, in New Haven. Light and Peace began as part of Beulah Enterprises, the church's Children's Mission, founded in 1995. The program evolved from the church's food pantry program, says Gretchen Pritchard, minister of Christian nurture and children's missioner. On Saturday morning, when disadvantaged families came to the church to pick up food in the cramped pantry, children had very little to do, often for extended periods of time. So members of the church began to sit with the children and read to them from the church's extensive library of children's books.

Eventually, as the food pantry was moved to more extensive space in the basement of the church, the informal children's program was formalized and moved into the parish hall, which allowed it room to expand. With guidance from Pritchard, who had developed programs for children and published books about children's education in the church, Beulah Enterprises became a ministry directed at kids. Its four components are a secular story hour, an evening worship service for children that is followed by crafts and dinner, a summer camp-like program, and an after-school program that offers academic enrichment twice each week in a safe and structured environment.

The church hopes to develop Beulah Enterprises' programs, including formal educational materials, as a package that other churches, like Trinity Episcopal, could purchase and replicate. When that happens, the program will not only generate a revenue stream that supports the children's ministry, but the impact of the program will continue to expand, says Pritchard.

Church on the Rock

Church on the Rock, in New Haven, has a congregation that is very supportive of public schools and the church is active in a number of programs and activities to help schools and children, says Pastor Leslie Foster, who previously taught elementary school in New Haven and Hamden. For two years, the church has been offering tutorial services to students from grades 1 through 12 once each week before a Wednesday evening service. The church also chose a New Haven middle school that it supports with supplies, volunteer

services and a mentoring program.

The church sponsors two youth groups that meet on Wednesday evenings for religious study. Those structured groups focus on excellence in character, career issues and encouragement of academic excellence. Pastor Foster routinely meets with the parents of all the youngsters participating in the Wednesday night programs, to discuss each child's progress. One night each month the groups also enjoy a cultural event, such as a Yale University football game.

Two years ago, the church participated in a two-part seminar on parenting adolescents, developed by the Yale University Child Study. Forty-five teens and their parents took part in the program, which has since grown into a monthly parent/adolescent support group that meets at the church.

The Appropriate Role of Faith Communities in the Public Schools

In 1995, the U.S. Department of Education published *Religious Expression in Public Schools*, a set of guidelines designed, in the words of former Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley, "to end much of the confusion regarding religious expression in our nation's public schools."

The guidelines, said Riley, emphasized two basic obligations of the First Amendment that have equal importance. "Schools may not discriminate against private religious expression by students, but must instead give students the same right to engage in religious activity and discussion as they have to engage in other comparable activity... At the same time, schools may not endorse religious activity or doctrine, nor may they coerce participation in religious activity... The right of religious expression in school does not include the right to have a 'captive audience' listen, or to compel other students to participate."

"When members and leadership of faith communities volunteer in schools or volunteer to work with students and their families for an educational purpose in partnership with public schools, they should act with the same understanding of the First Amendment as do school officials," according to the Partnership for Family Involvement in Education's report *Faith Communities Joining with Local Communities to Support Children's Learning.*

The report offers the following guidelines for faith leaders:

- DON'T participate in student-led religious activities when in your capacity in the educational program, but DO acknowledge students from the educational program when you meet them in a religious context;
- DO stop student speech that constitutes harassment aimed at another student or group of students, but DON'T infringe on the rights of students and their family members to speak about religion or to say a prayer or to read a Scripture, provided it is within the reasonable limits of rules for orderliness, talking, and congregating that are set for other speech and activities;
- DON'T prohibit or discourage speech or other activity simply because of its religious content or nature and DON'T pray with the students and families or encourage them to pray during your volunteer session with them;
- DO impart civic values and virtues and encourage positive character development, but DON'T preach about your faith to the children and their families while conducting your educational activity.

Religion Expression in Public Schools is available online at http://www.ed.gov/inits/religionandschools/guides.html.

As the sample of churches and organizations referenced in this report demonstrates, the range of programs and services churches and religious organizations can provide to enhance the public school experience is limited only by the imagination and commitment of the people involved. As the Partnership for Family Involvement in Education noted in its report, *Faith Communities Joining with Local Communities to Support Children's Learning*, "Understand that better education IS everybody's business."

■

Who Can You Call?

Want more information on how your church or religious organization can play a meaningful role in support of your local public schools? Contact one of the experts who offered ideas for this report.

Paul Christie
Center City Churches
Hartford (860) 728-3201

Phyllis Reeds
Asylum Hill Congregational Church
Hartford (860) 525-5696

Trudy White
Trinity Episcopal Church
Hartford (860) 527-8133

Rev. Shelley Copeland
Capitol Region Conference of Churches
Hartford (860) 236-1295

Richard Mattheson
Central Baptist Church
Hartford (860) 522-9275

Pastor Leslie Foster
Church on the Rock
New Haven (203) 498-2687

Gretchen Pritchard
Episcopal Church of St. James and St. Paul
New Haven (203) 785-8248

Nancy Ammerman, Ph.D
Hartford Seminary
Hartford (860) 509-9545

CPEC
179 Allyn Street, Suite 308
Hartford, CT 06103-1421
Phone: (860) 722-2490
Fax: (860) 548-7363
E-mail: cpec@cpec.org
Web site: http://www.cpec.org/

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